

Local Vietcong More Active in Areas Near Saigon

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RACHKIEN, South Vietnam, June 16—Taking advantage of the major North Vietnamese attacks elsewhere local Communist units have been quietly reasserting control this spring over many of their once-powerful bases in the provinces around Saigon. They are posing what officers on the scene consider a serious threat both to the vital pacification program and to the capital itself.

Senior American and South Vietnamese officials insist confidently that they have stopped all large-scale Communist infiltration toward Saigon since the North Vietnamese offensive began at the end of March.

But an American visitor on an extensive tour of the supposedly pacified belt of provinces adjacent to the capital encountered villagers and local officers who said repeatedly that for the first time in several years Vietcong agents had been active again, holding nighttime propaganda meetings, recruiting young men and women into their armed forces and taxing farmers.

"Those other gentlemen are back again," said a soft-drink vendor in this district town in Longan Province, 18 miles south of Saigon. Referring to the Vietcong obliquely because of her American customer, she added:

"All at once they're everywhere. They even came into our house near the district headquarters the other night. They told us they would be taking over the district soon and they wanted to know where my teen-age son is."

Highways Are Breached

Among other signs of increased Communist activity near Saigon, an area American officials often term "the soft underbelly," are the following:

¶North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops have made several successful cuts in the highways as close as 30 miles to Saigon, including a three-day blockade last week on Route 1 in Haungghia Province, west of the capital. At the same time Communist soldiers have occupied close to the capital; in one instance, in Phuoc Tuy, a coastal province east of Saigon, they held on for over two weeks.

¶According to the hamlet evacuation system, the controversial American program for rating village security, only 40 per cent of the population of Haungghia Province is under Government control. Lying between the Parrot's Beak

section of eastern Cambodia and Saigon, has long been the favorite Communist infiltration route to the capital.

¶In an effort to wipe out infiltrating forces, there has been a series of B-52 raids as close as 15 miles to Saigon in the past week—the closest to the capital in nearly four years.

¶American advisers to the South Vietnamese police are reported to be seriously concerned over the possibility of an attack on Saigon by Vietcong demolition experts, about 600 of whom are reliably said to have infiltrated into the city. In contrast, the highly publicized attack on the American embassy in Saigon during the 1968 Tet offensive was carried out by only a score.

The heaviest concentration of Communist troops in the Saigon area is believed to be in the Parrot's Beak, 50 miles to the west, where about 10,000 to 12,000 North Vietnamese have been assembled in recent weeks, many from the siege of Anloc.

Most top allied officials say that the defense of Anloc was a victory for South Vietnam, but there are experienced observers here who maintain that the North Vietnamese achieved exactly what they intended—drawing off large Government forces from the region around Saigon and opening it up to infiltration.

Many of the places into which the Vietcong have been moving near Saigon—the Iron Triangle, War Zone, the Hobo Woods and the Boiloi Woods—are places from which they were driven at great cost by

American G.I.'s in the late nineteen-sixties.

The situation here in Longan, south of Saigon, appears fairly typical. Almost totally under Vietcong control in the early sixties, the province had gradually come under Government authority to the point where it was considered 90 per cent pacified.

When seven North Vietnamese battalions—about 2,500 men—tried to move from Cambodia toward Saigon through Longan in late April they were met and apparently defeated by the regional forces.

Lieut. Col. Robert W. Lockridge, senior American adviser in the province said: "We hit them so hard they just broke up and ran. It was the first time our regional forces fought the North Vietnamese Army, and they did a great job."

In Colonel Lockridge's estimation, the people of Longan have been getting so prosperous that they would not want to rejoin the Vietcong. "I've got one district here where we found that 70 per cent of the families had TV sets," he said.

At the same time, however, there are telltale signs of renewed Communist activity throughout Longan. Terrorist incidents, including murders and kidnappings of local officials, have already surpassed the total for last year.

Villagers interviewed in three of the province's seven districts reported instances of late-night recruitment and propaganda meetings called by local Vietcong, who they said appeared extremely confident. Several

townspeople in Tanan, the provincial capital, said Communist agents had reappeared there for the first time in three years.

Here in Rachkien District, an official warned an American visitor against continuing down the road to inspect three villages in his district, even during the day. "Security is a little bad there," he remarked with an embarrassed smile, "The Vietcong have returned."